

An Interview with

John S. Lewis

June 28, 1974

Interviewed by

H. T. Holmes

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

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**AU 860**

- HOLMES: Yeah, I noticed there weren't any pictures out here. Ok. Now. Supposedly this is recording and this is H. T. Holmes with the Department of Archives and History with Eleana Turner, also with the Department. We are interviewing Mr. John S. Lewis, editor of the Woodville Republican in Woodville, Mississippi and the date is June 28, 1974. Now that I have disposed of that. Mr. Lewis, to start off with, could we have some biographical information. Your parents' names and just a brief history of your family.
- LEWIS: Well, my grandfather Captain John South Lewis (inaudible) bought the Woodville Republican in 1879. 18 and 79 and served as editor until his death in 1900. At that time my father, Robert Lewis, took over as editor and served until 1934. From '34 until '37 my brother served as editor and in 1937 I became the editor and have served ever since that time. By an ironic coincidence our sesquicentennial edition dated June 28, 1974 is exactly 40 years to the day of my father's death. My father died June 28, 1934. 10 years after he'd gotten out the centennial edition.
- HOLMES: Well, that is a coincidence. Mercy. So you are actually the fourth member of your family to become editor.
- LEWIS: Third generation.
- HOLMES: Third generation. What...Let's talk a minute about journalism in Mississippi. You've been associated with it a good while and you've seen a lot of changes take place in the state. What of that community – local newspaper reporting – what...
- LEWIS: Well, we have newspapers more or less (inaudible) small town (inaudible) paper. There have not been great changes during my tenure as editor in our method of doing things. We are located in an old part of the state and I feel that my readers like the old way of doing things newspaper-wise. They (inaudible). I have more or less continued the same style of reporting.
- HOLMES: I think in these days of credibility in the print it's probably a commendable thing to do that you have. What about the printing method? How far back does the printing method that you're using now go?
- LEWIS: The present newspaper press I've only had about four years. It's a so-called (inaudible) type which is roll (inaudible) press which prints, cuts and folds the papers. Until that time, it was June 1970 we bought this press, until that time we were printing on a so-called two page flatbed press. (inaudible) back room and then hand fold. (inaudible) On line type machines I have two

of them. One of them was bought by my brother in 1934 and it's still our number one machine that one I acquired about four years ago (inaudible) this thing has photographic frame making equipment. (inaudible) I went by the bank and asked them what I could do (inaudible)

HOLMES: This for the (inaudible). Did you want to say something else? Go ahead.

LEWIS: Give me a cup of coffee.

HOLMES: At the beginning of the tape we were referring to a tragedy that occurred in Woodville and the way the community has come to the aid of some fire victims and I want to talk about life in a small town in a few minutes, but let's get back to journalism now. Where were we? You're printing method, I believe.

LEWIS: Printing method. We are one of the few so-called (inaudible) operators still left in the state. In the last five years the vast majority of the papers have gone to (inaudible) separate photograph process rather than use line type and hot metal. I think two or three years ago maybe we hit the 50/50 mark but since that time there has been a big change in the printing methods around the state. It has been in many instances to centralize the printing where several small papers have gone together and bought one press (inaudible). This, in my way of thinking, is taking a little bit of your independence away. (inaudible) got like a printing house (inaudible) which really is not (inaudible) trend that I regret to some extent because small country grass roots (inaudible) I feel very strongly are in many ways the backbone of our society and our civilization as opposed to our national media which after all is controlled by (inaudible) right and wrong it is not in the best interest of all concerned I don't think.

HOLMES: This leads to this question: in your case and in other cases that you're familiar with how (inaudible) independent have these local editors been in reporting community issues and so forth? Do you report it as you see it or what stand do you take?

LEWIS: It is impossible regardless of what (inaudible) in my opinion it is impossible to write a straight news story without having some of your own personal opinions involved. I try as much as possible on news to write events as they occur but the very fact that subconsciously I may leave out aspects or unintentionally add aspects. All people have (inaudible) news stories (inaudible) I try as best I can to report the happenings (inaudible) except in areas in which they would hurt someone and unless it's something that with real major importance. I deliberately ignore news stories where I can't see that anyone (inaudible) will hurt someone. I must say that consequently newspapers that write (inaudible) only to publicize.

- HOLMES: So you are your own censor?
- LEWIS: Yes, I would have to say that. I haven't really thought about it in that sense until this moment, but I am guilty of that.
- HOLMES: Well, I don't know whether you should use the word 'guilty' there or not. It seems to me that it's the responsibility of the editor, which probably in some cases the editor fails to live up to. Certainly in the case of these large newspapers in recent months.
- LEWIS: Maybe this is not a becoming thing to say for posterity but (inaudible) luncheon meeting broke up today (inaudible) the president of the association read a letter that said it was from the president which pointed out a great importance and also a great responsibility of the press (inaudible) that the only way out is (inaudible) wanted to get up and ask for the floor but I wouldn't dare to do so to say that I felt that this was something I would like to comment on because I feel that we (inaudible). I think as my readers agree with me in why (inaudible) hanky-panky (inaudible) with any public officials certainly...
- HOLMES: Do you feel that...I ask you to draw from your experiences the editors of small town newspapers feel this responsibility more strongly than the editors of papers who have mass appeal?
- LEWIS: I think they would indeed (inaudible) fair for me to comment on because I just don't know what the (inaudible) reaction is (inaudible). But I do feel that the mass media, really this is not fair, but I feel that to sell papers and to attract viewers they pick out the sensational side of the news (inaudible) whether this is true or not. To some extent it's true of all newspapers but I think the larger media (inaudible). After all that I know I have personal responsibility to them (inaudible).
- HOLMES: Do you feel that grass roots editors have the ability more so than the large newspapers would (inaudible) public opinion? Because you do know them personally, when they read opinions on news stories in your newspaper they know that, you are the hands standing behind them?
- LEWIS: Yes. Maybe this (inaudible) but yes, I do feel that a responsible country editor will have the confidence of his readers. A lot of my readers tell me regularly (inaudible) that's a great responsibility to them. A few times I have failed to (inaudible). They didn't know and they felt (inaudible) but it's a fact.
- HOLMES: For the historical record? What is the process by which you elect the Board of (inaudible)?

- LEWIS: As best I can I study their record. What I know about their past records, their platforms. Of some importance, though I don't really (inaudible). Platforms are...
- HOLMES: They tend to be quite similar.
- LEWIS: In many instances I don't have the knowledge that I would like to have. I study it as best I can (inaudible).
- HOLMES: But for now let's get into the local newspaper, the process again for the historical record. Could you give us in a generalized way how the paper begins, is put together and finished?
- LEWIS: Well, my paper is (inaudible). Mine is more or less a family run operation (inaudible) most of it. We have one employee who goes out and finds the local and personal news and then she and my wife do the society and will fill that role but all the rest of the reporting is done by me as editor. At times my sons will (inaudible) work with me but they're both in school...
- (BREAK IN TAPE)
- HOLMES: There. Let's see. About your sons helping you...
- LEWIS: Yes, we were talking about gathering news. Most of it I did myself and (inaudible). I try to set aside one night a week for my editorial writing. I find that interruptions during the day are such that time I can't sit down and editorialize. Constant interruptions. So we have, I have friends who are at the courthouse or the sheriff's office, police department who call me and let me know if there's anything going on. The local funeral director keeps me posted on deaths. The other stories I just the first of the week... We print actually on Wednesday afternoon. Monday I start out (inaudible) Monday morning. I also sell the ads by the way (inaudible) selling ads (inaudible) the best I can (inaudible) on news stories. I follow them up and write. We don't have any... I have a number of rural correspondents who come to town where I have a local editor there. But basically I'm it. I do all the major news stories.
- HOLMES: So it's basically a one man operation.
- LEWIS: Right.
- HOLMES: You mentioned while ago that you tend to stay away from any controversial issues. You deal with like social news and the dealings of the city council...
- LEWIS: No, I don't, I don't. I didn't mean to imply that I stay away from controversial issues as such. I think I said that where news stories or issues

develop (inaudible) depending on the level of public scandal where if you publicize that (inaudible) no one will be better off for having printed it.

HOLMES: Speaking of local issues, besides the election of public officials to what extent do you allow your newspaper to take a stand on issues that will effect Woodville?

LEWIS: I'm trying very hard to take a stand on anything that, for anything that I think beneficial to the town or the county (inaudible) I have no (inaudible) Board of Supervisors (inaudible) come in contact with. I've never had any major difficulties with (inaudible) criticize things (inaudible).

HOLMES: If I decided to do, and I'm very seriously thinking about it particularly after talking to you and I had thought about it before, an oral history of journalism in Mississippi, especially grass roots journalism where would you suggest how I begin it? Who would I talk to and go about it?

LEWIS: Well your best source of sources would be board members of the (inaudible) Press Association. He could tell you...

HOLMES: I have. Miss Capers has an interview with him on broadcasting in Jackson.

LEWIS: Well, George (inaudible) ...in a seminar that (inaudible) ...the early life of the Natchez district dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until about 1840. I looked in my file and the only thing I have the things that I have references I have (inaudible) in my file old news stories about (inaudible) in Mississippi, but as far as I know there are no very good sources (inaudible). One book by Mr. Henry (inaudible), Mr. High Henry of Jackson who wrote (inaudible) spoke of my grandfather in that book. Latter part of last century first part of this century.

HOLMES: I imagine the Archives has a copy of that also. The purpose of the oral history program, or theoretically of any oral history program, is to create source material for scholars and scholarly research. So with that in mind and again referring to my projected project what type of approach should I take to an interview with these people? What would you suggest the issues that I approach or the issues to discuss things about the history of journalism? What do you think would be of value to a scholar?

LEWIS: Well, it would be wonderful if you could interview enough where you could get a history of some of the older papers of the state. (inaudible) maybe go back a little more (inaudible). Then, as best they could get them to summarize the editorial policies of their predecessors (inaudible) too reactionary. This is the way I am (inaudible) our papers say that the Woodville Republican fell on evil days during the Reconstruction period. It was controlled by the scalawags and that kind of thing. Little things like this

I think would be of great interest to have a record of items like that. (inaudible) My understanding, you know far about this than I, that the time Woodville Republican was founded in 1824 the predominant party (inaudible) was Whigs. Short time after that (inaudible) ...in fact from my grandfather's time on (inaudible) someone who advocated (inaudible) the Republican Party. This paper was named from. As far as I know from the evil days when the scalawags were in control until the time (inaudible) Since that time (inaudible)

HOLMES: Ok, you say it was staunchly Democratic, then you supported a Republican. To what extent did you actually in your writing your editorials, besides you know coming out in support of a particular candidate, do you strongly advocate the principles of the party with whom you are in favor?

LEWIS: I, at that time, (inaudible) thoroughly disillusioned with the principles of the Democratic Party. I felt that the principles that I thought (inaudible) the Republican Party that they stood for were (inaudible) ...and ironically I was the chairman – I mean secretary of the (inaudible) committee (inaudible). The last few years of my tenure I was supporting the Republican presidential nominee and I think (inaudible)

HOLMES: Well at this point in time, if I may use that phrase, what is Wilkinson County now as far as political leanings? Independent (inaudible)?

LEWIS: Well, we almost (inaudible) tragically a large percentage of the black voters (inaudible). This has been graphically demonstrated in a Congressional race we had about four weeks ago where we had a number of candidates, as far as I know very popular with the black citizens, he has been on a local level. He ran for different county officials, he ran for Congress. Charles Evers (inaudible). The local voters voted for another candidate (inaudible) a local man.

HOLMES: That kind of (inaudible)

LEWIS: Well, no that's (inaudible)

HOLMES: Mr. Meredith? Mr. James Meredith?

LEWIS: And Mr. Meredith carried the county vote. So, even though this man was personally (inaudible). And has worked with them still when Mr. Evers told them to vote for Meredith, now maybe I'm being unfair, maybe they voted for him because they thought he was the most qualified, but I doubt seriously that half of them knew of Mr. (inaudible). What I'm saying is the, we have a very tragic situation where (inaudible) making up their minds telling them we have a large number who are herded in and voted by this primary by the militant black vote (inaudible) who can mark any name on



there they want to. Very, very undemocratic process. As far as the Whites are concerned I would say (BREAK IN TAPE) Until very recent years it was almost dangerous to say you were a Republican in Wilkinson County, but this is no longer true. I think the preponderance of the White voters in the county in the Congressional election that just passed voted Republican, voted for the Incumbent, Thad Cochran. Now I don't think they feel a strong attachment to the Republican Party as such but many of them just feel very hand tied Democratic at this point in time.

HOLMES: Alright, we'll steer away from political discussions now. That would be a topic for another oral history project. Let's talk about Woodville. The small town aspects. Quality of life, if I may use that term, here. I was very impressed this morning with, several people remarked to me that the young people love to come back to Woodville after they go away to college. (inaudible) but they want to come back. My experience with small town people is that the young people don't want to come back. What is it about Woodville that makes it so special?

LEWIS: I wish that I knew (inaudible) something tangible. I think this is true. Tragically we have no industry, no (inaudible) young people here unless their parents have a business here they go have a mom that they can work with a family operation. Most of the college graduates have to go somewhere else to make a living. We have quite a lot of few who finish high school possibly and some college graduates live on in Woodville and drive to Natchez or south to little towns 20 miles south of here to a little paper mill. But Woodville has to me an intangible (inaudible). My son for instance, both my sons in fact (inaudible). My two older children (inaudible) one of them married a young man who has a job in (inaudible). My older son (inaudible) but I was (inaudible) I have a very strong feeling that Americans, all over the country are searching for roots. National news media, big newspapers (inaudible) This is an exaggeration, my Aunt Susie was married in Wilkinson County between the years 1880 and 1895. Could you (inaudible) mentioned in your paper? (inaudible) requests covering 17 year period (inaudible). And this has grown in recent years. I just have this theory and maybe it's wrong about it all. As the metropolitan areas grow (inaudible) the concrete jungles or even suburbia, the metropolitan areas they like to have some feeling that their grandparents or their great-grandparents lived in (inaudible) not just Woodville but in a close country community. (inaudible) of my circulation goes all over the country. (inaudible) original residents of Woodville and of Wilkinson County (inaudible) have requests from many, many areas now because not only (inaudible) but seems to me that they just want roots somewhere. Young couple that's living in Detroit working somewhere if they could just know that back in Wilkinson County the little country newspaper chronicles their parents, their grandparents. Their marriage, the deaths, the acquisition of land – this seems to fulfill some longing I would say. Maybe this is just

something I've dreamed up. (inaudible)

HOLMES: I agree with you very strongly. This has been my experience too. In college, people, college kids who don't have a family home to go back to. (inaudible) That's one of my favorite subjects too. But I do want to lead into something. Well, no, I'm glad to have your opinion on that. I think it's very valuable. But along that line, you said a moment ago that you thought it was tragic that there was no industry. Now I will tend to disagree with you there because when you begin to get industry you begin to get urban areas and you begin to have this loss of identity. And you don't have any or much industry if any at all here in Woodville and comparing and looking at other small towns in our state which do have industry, don't you feel that you're better off?

LEWIS: Maybe I should retract that statement. I meant that it was tragic that the young people that want to live here could not live here. (inaudible) I feel very strongly I for many years am one of the great Chamber of Commerce boosters trying to get into Wilkinson County. The older I get the more I feel how blessed we are that we do not have many major industries located here to change our way of life. (inaudible) I use the word tragic (inaudible) that was very poorly stated when I did say that. (inaudible) On the other side of the coin the only way they could be would (inaudible) in their way of life (inaudible)

HOLMES: I want to agree with you and I want to say this because I say it every chance I get that I'm very much opposed to this wholesale wooing of industry coming to Mississippi because, and I want you to comment on this in a second, you seem to have a very high level of education here in Woodville because so many people do come back. The people who work in factories in these small towns and so forth, our state government has done a good job of bringing the factory in and giving them jobs for people to go to work and then come home and they don't have anything to do and they don't have the motivation or perhaps the education to do things like that and you have been able to here in Woodville maintain a higher quality of life (inaudible) which I think would be enviable and desirable for the rest of the state to have. So, proceed from there.

LEWIS: We have been blessed in maintaining our way of life to a great degree the way it has been all my life. Maybe there are drawbacks to this but (inaudible) principle payroll here on the other side of the coin (inaudible) which is an unfortunate situation and a regrettable one (inaudible). I feel that (inaudible)

HOLMES: I wish we had time for you to.

LEWIS: Let me bring this point about our way of life that may be of interest. Some

years ago, many years now by your viewpoint probably, when my father (inaudible) in 1934 (inaudible) study of antebellum culture in the Deep South they sent a young man (inaudible). At that time we thought that was rather an insult (inaudible). I think it's true that many years of our life that we, we are behind the times but (inaudible)

HOLMES: Well, I thank you for this interview. We will quit now because I know you've had a busy day but I'd like to ask you if later on someday I may come back to town.

LEWIS: (inaudible)

**END OF RECORDING**